

General Subjects Section
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1948 - 1949

THE OPERATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION
506TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY (101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION)
IN THE VICINITY OF CARENTAN
6-8 JUNE 1944
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: PARACHUTE INFANTRY
BATTALION ATTACKING IN THE ENLARGEMENT OF A BEACHHEAD

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- S-2 Statement of Eli H Howell, Major, Infantry (Inactive
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- S-4 Statement of Ronald C Speirs, Captain, Infantry
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Infantry.
- PK Personal knowledge.
- EW Eye witness.

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INTRODUCTION

The operations of a Parachute Battalion in the Normandy Campaign is an unusual subject for military study for several reasons: (a) The missions assigned to the airborne units participating in the campaign were successfully accomplished despite an initial operational fiasco. (1) (b) The pre-invasion prediction of Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory that the operation was so hazardous that it was doomed to failure was not confirmed. (2) (c) While the Normandy campaign entailed the first large scale use of airborne troops, the actual number of troops seizing the objectives was relatively small. (3)

This monograph relates to the operations of the 1st Battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, from D-day to D-plus-2 in the seizure of a beachhead on the Cotentin Peninsula near Carentan, France during the Normandy Campaign in June of 1944. The operations of this battalion can be considered typical of the other participating parachute battalions. Its esprit de corps was high; its pre-combat training had been intensive; its troops were properly imbued with the will to close with and destroy the enemy; and its missions were accomplished with similar difficulties and degrees of success. (4)

OPERATION OVERLORD

The seizure of the Cotentin Peninsula and the port city of Cherbourg (Map I-1) was of vital importance to the success of (1) B-1, p.14; (2) B-2, p.246; (3) B-1, P.14; (4) PK.

Operation Overlord, the plan for the invasion of western Europe. Drafting of the operation^{plan} had begun in the summer of 1943, when⁽⁵⁾ the Germans had been driven out of Africa and the assault in Italy was progressing as planned. Troops and supplies had been built up in England to permit a major campaign designed to cross the channel, establish beachheads for the unloading of troops and logistical support, and to secure ports for the more efficient movement of battle impedimenta. The general plan envisaged the employment of five assault beaches: three in the British sector to the east, and two in the American sector to the west. (Map I-2) Two American airborne divisions and one British airborne division were available in addition to the seaborne troops. (6) It was determined that the two American divisions, the 82d and 101st, would be employed in the rear of the westernmost beach to facilitate the early capture of Cherbourg. (7) Two terrain features which dominated the area of operations prescribed the majority of the initial objectives for these two divisions.

TERRAIN OF THE COTENTIN

The Douve river is the dominating feature of the Cotentin Peninsula. (Map II-1) Its course is generally to the southeast, winding through a wide flat valley and emptying into the English Channel north of Carentan. A lock (Map II-2) near Carentan was believed to control the drainage of this valley, and it was thought that the force holding the lock could flood the valley, thereby restricting traffic into the peninsula to a few bridges. The westernmost assault beach, given the code name of "Utah", was a wide, flat, sandy beach which was dominated by high ground about a thousand yards inland. (Map II-3) Between the beach and the high ground was a strip of low, marshy ground which air photos revealed

(5) B-1, p.2; (6) B-1, p.1; (7) B-1, p.3.

to be inundated. This area was traversed by four causeways, which could be easily blown or obstructed, and was defended by a system of entrenchments, pillboxes mounting tank turrets, and concrete gun emplacements, all of which gave interlocking fire with adjacent positions. Thus the terrain dictated that the look to the north of Carentan, the bridges across the Douve, and the high ground dominating the four beach exits be quickly seized to permit the unrestricted use of the beach, and to prevent the enemy from moving his reserves into the beachhead. (8) In addition to these, the disposition of enemy troops demanded that one other objective be secured.

ENEMY SITUATION

On the high ground dominating the northern part of the beach was an emplaced coastal battery which commanded the entire beach. (Map II-4) The reduction of this position and the capture of troops manning it was another mission given to the airborne force. (9)

Elsewhere on the peninsula, intelligence reports indicated that the 709th and 243d Infantry Divisions were disposed along the east and west coasts respectively. Shortly before the invasion, additional intelligence revealed that the 91st Infantry Division had also moved into the Utah beach area. The enemy was believed capable of rigid defense of the beaches by the 709th Division supported at H-hour by the 91st Division, and piecemeal counterattacks by a maximum of four battalions and a battalion combat team on D-day. (10)

MISSION AND PLANS

The mission of the VII Corps, as indicated in Field Order Number 1, dated 28 May 1944, was: "VII Corps assaults Utah Beach (8) B-3, p.90; (9) B-3, P.92; (10) B-1, p. 6.

on D-day at H-hour and captures Cherbourg with minimum delay." The 101st Airborne Division was assigned to this Corps with the general mission of landing in rear of the beach, securing the beachhead from the north, preventing the movement of enemy reserves into the south flank of the Corps along the Douve river, seizing the high ground in rear of the beach, and making contact with the 82d Airborne Division to the west. (11)(12)

The division plan called for the initial employment of its three parachute regiments in the seizure of the division objectives, to be later supported by the glider regiment which, due to the scarcity of planes, would have to arrive by sea. The 506th Parachute Infantry was given the mission of seizing the two southern beach exits, destroying all lines of communication in its zone, particularly the underground cable connecting Carentan and Cherbourg, the seizure of two wooden bridges across the Douve between the lock and the sea, and establishing contact with the 501st Parachute Infantry which was to seize the lock and the bridges leading into Carentan. (13) The regimental plan (Map III-1) prescribed the use of two drop zones and assigned the mission of seizing the beach exits to the 2d Battalion, the seizure of the bridges to the 3d Battalion, and the severance of the Carentan-Cherbourg cable to a platoon of the 1st Battalion, which was to remain in regimental reserve.

The 1st Battalion was given another platoon mission - that of demonstrating to the south of the village of St Marie du Mont while the 2d Battalion marched around the north of the town en-route to the beach exits. Drop Zone "C" was assigned to the 1st and 2d Battalions and Regimental Headquarters. Drop Zone "D" was assigned to the 3d Battalion. (14)

(11) B-1, p.3; (12) PK; (13) B-3, p.92; (14) PK.

PREPARATIONS

These and most of the other planning details were settled prior to 29 May 1944, when the Regiment was sealed in its marshalling areas at airfields in the south of England. There, the first order of business was the orientation and briefing of troops. For this purpose, papier mache models of the area, including the drop zones and objectives, had been previously prepared, and were issued to the units. Briefing was done by platoon. Initially, the Battalion staff officers and company commanders were briefed, then each platoon leader brought his platoon into the briefing tent for a complete orientation on the enemy situation. The missions of the regiment, the objectives of each battalion, the regimental, battalion, and company plans, and the terrain, paying particular attention to the drop zones and the routes to the objectives, were studied. As the 1st Battalion was to be in Regimental reserve, Lt Colonel William A Turner, the battalion commander, personally briefed each platoon of his battalion on his plan for the execution of any of the Regimental missions which the reserve battalion might inherit should anything happen to any of the other battalions. A platoon of "A" Company studied routes to the Carantan-Cherbourg cable and a platoon of "B" Company paid particular attention to the terrain south of St Marie du Mont. (15)

It must be kept in mind that at the time of this operation the battalion consisted of a headquarters company and three rifle companies. The headquarters company consisted of a headquarters, an 81 mm mortar platoon of four guns, a machine gun platoon of eight guns, a communications platoon, and a section of rocket launchers which was not authorized by T/O&E.

(15) EW.

The rifle companies consisted of a headquarters and three rifle platoons of two rifle squads and a 60 mm mortar squad each. Total strength of each rifle company was 128 men and 8 officers. Total strength of the battalion with medical and other attachments was slightly over 600.

Following the initial orientation, maps were distributed in three scales. Quantities were sufficient that each enlisted man received a 1/100,000 map of the entire Cotentin peninsula. Each officer, first sergeant, and mortar squad leader received 1/50,000 sheets of the division zone of responsibility, and each officer platoon sergeant, and mortar squad leader received a set of 1/25,000 maps of the division area. As the complete set in the latter two scales was too voluminous for one individual to carry, the recipient selected those sheets which he considered to be of utmost tactical value and distributed the other sheets to individuals of his command.

In addition to these, a specially prepared night map of the drop zone and immediate vicinity was distributed to each individual. This map consisted of a 1/7,500 vertical photo of the center of the drop zone, surrounded by sketches of the adjacent countryside as it might appear from an elevation of 1,000 feet over the center of the drop zone. These maps were studied by individuals, squads, and platoons. Road nets were sketched and memorized, and, finally, each platoon visited the briefing tent to study the terrain model at least one more time. (16) This substitution for a ground reconnaissance prior to an attack was carried on concurrently with the distribution of special equipment.

(16) EW.

The lack of ammunition carriers made resupply of mortar and machine gun ammunition a serious problem. In an attempt to solve this problem, each individual not a member of a machine gun or mortar crew was required to carry either a belt of ammunition or a 60 mm mortar round. Additional ammunition for these weapons was put in bundles to be dropped from the racks of the airplanes.

Antitank defense was to be initially confined to the rocket launchers carried in the platoons. Experience had indicated that the tubes of these weapons were frequently bent or otherwise damaged on dropping. Therefore, half of these weapons were to be dropped on the person of the gunners and the balance dropped in bundles from the racks. To supplement this meager antitank defense, each individual was given a one-pound Hawkins antitank mine to be collected upon reaching the assembly areas. (17)

Phosphorescent discs were issued for individual identification or night recognition, and phosphorescent cords were made available to distinctively mark each squad bundle. Ordinary ten-cent-store metal crickets were distributed for challenging during the assembly - one click the challenge; two clicks the reply. The passwords for the first five days were memorized.

Flight manifests were prepared. The chaplains held daily well-attended services. Letters were written and censored. Movies were shown nightly. Some athletic activity was arranged, although this was limited due to the need for security. While the marshalling tent camps had been erected several weeks prior to their occupancy, the grass in the center of the fields had not been trampled, and it was, therefore, prudent to limit traffic to the edge of the fields lest aerial reconnaissance reveal the presence of troops.

(17) EW.

A new type individual first aid packet was made available, which contained a large dressing, a tourniquet, and a morphine syrette. Benzedrine tablets were issued to the company commanders; halozone tablets were issued to all. Gasproof capes, vesicant detectors, and assault type gas masks were issued. The uniform was the jump suit, gas impregnated. Ranges were provided, where a last check of the weapons' zero setting could be made.

The troops were permitted to exchange the money in their possession for French francs. One thousand francs were entrusted to each company commander for use in paying guides. Pilot escape kits were signed out to each officer. The escape kit included in its rubberized-fabric container one thousand francs, a compass small enough to be concealed in the anus, a map of France printed on a piece of silk the size of a handkerchief, and a small steel file.

British-type leg bags had been procured to be used by radio operators and members of weapons crews to permit them to descend with their equipment available for immediate action. Mae Wests and parachutes were issued, fitted, and checked. Containers for rifles, sacks for machine gun belts, and ammunition was allotted. (18)

The basic load of small arms, crew-served weapons, ammunition, and grenades was prescribed for each individual. In addition to this, as much additional ammunition of any type that an individual desired to carry was made available.

Ordnance, Signal, and Quartermaster teams were present in the marshalling area to repair, replace, or issue any of the normal items of troop equipment. A service detachment prepared excellent meals. These service units relieved the units of all responsibilities and details that were humanly possible.

Most of the details of preparation had been completed prior to D minus 1, so that day was devoted to last minute adjustments of equipment, the final honing of trench knives, and rest. Supper, on D minus 1, consisted of white bread, steak, and ice cream in addition to other more familiar items on the menu.

At 2000 hours, the men blackened their faces, buckled into their equipment and marched to their planes on the airstrip, stopping enroute at the hangar to pick up their parachutes and Mae Wests. While this was a short march, it was fatiguing, as the weight of equipment and parachute paraphernalia nearly doubled the weight of the individual. Pilots and jumpmasters checked the plane manifests, a jeep messenger delivered to each plane farewell messages from Generals Montgomery and Eisenhower, the motors were turned over, motion sickness pills were taken, and at 2310 the battalion was airborne. (19)

THE FLIGHT

Taking off from Upottery Field (Map III-2), in addition to the 1st Battalion, was the Regimental Headquarters serial, and a battalion from the 501st Parachute Infantry, also scheduled to land on Drop Zone "C". The regiment's 3d Battalion had taken off from Exeter airfield (Map ~~III-3~~^I) with another battalion of the 501st, which was bound for Drop Zone "D". (20) *map III*

The joint briefing of pilots and jumpmasters on D-2 had thoroughly covered rendezvous areas for all elements of the division, serial composition, time and space between serials, routes of all serials to and from the drop areas, and particular stress had been given to the drop signals. It had been prescribed that a "tight" formation would be flown, the altitude over

(19) EW. (20) B-3, p.73.

the drop zone was to be a minimum of six hundred feet and a maximum of one thousand feet, and air speed was to be approximately one hundred ten miles an hour while parachutists were jumping. The crew chief would notify the jumpmaster when the planes were ten minutes away from the DZ. A red light would be flashed five minutes away from the DZ and all planes of a serial would flash a green light simultaneously, the "GO" signal, when the serial leader had passed over the pathfinders' T, and signalled the other planes from his astro dome. Pathfinder markings would consist of the location of radar and radio homing sets at the bisection of the two green electrically lighted lines of the T's. Pathfinders would fly slightly different routes and would arrive on the ground one-half hour before the combat serials. (21)(22)(23)

The takeoff, serial rendezvous, and formation of the sky train were uneventful. The air was calm, the anti motion pills had tended to make the men drowsy, and the formation was extremely "tight". Two ground check points, the Bill of Portland and the Portland Light Ship, were passed and everything appeared propitious for a successful jump, when the coast of France was clearly sighted some fifteen hundred feet below.

Just inland of the coast (Map I-6), the formation entered a dense cloud or fog bank. The pilots immediately compensated for this by taking some interval. As the fog grew even more dense and visibility dropped to zero, pilot apprehension could be detected in that the planes were not handled as smoothly as before. To add to the difficulties of poor vision, light flak was experienced and some ships were shot down. Upon flying out of the fog into a clear sky, the arcs of small arms tracers could be observed loop-

(21) PK; (22) B-3, p.73; (23) B-4, p. 2.

ing up from the ground. (24)(25)

The pilots, disregarding their orders, took violent evasive action, some diving to treetop level, others climbing, turning, and doing whatever could be done to avoid the light ground fire. The formation left after leaving the fog was soon entirely dissipated, and with it went tactical unity and all of the carefully made plans to land in mass on the drop fields. Jumpmaster reports indicated that elements of three planes tended to stay together, which was some small consolation. (26)(27)

The speed of ground assembly is directly proportional to the concentration of planes in the air. Experience has proven that the conditions for an ideal jump assembly are: minimum distance in depth and width of serial^{to}/effect the greatest concentration of parachutists in the air; calm air and minimum air speed, short of stalling, prevent dispersion due to both drift and extended interval between the first and last men out of the planes; flat even terrain to prevent minor injuries on landing, and to give an unobstructed view of the entire drop zone; and experienced troops. (28)
Assembly training had been extensive, both after actual jumps and simulated jumps. The best possible jump fields had been selected. The air was calm, but the factors of air speed and flight concentration were not under the control of the tactical commander, and consequently the speedy assembly of troops and prompt execution of the missions appeared to be doomed to failure as predicted.

THE DROP

Map III shows the drop zones as planned, and Overlay I to Map III shows the pattern of the actual drop. Some sticks were dropped as far as twenty miles away from the nearest drop zone.

(24) EW; (25) B-1, p. 14; (26) PK; (27) B-5, p.4; (28) PK

The majority of jumpmasters reported they did not see their crew chiefs after they were airborne; most got a warning light in varying times from the drop; air speeds seemed to be excessive, although this was only a matter of opinion; and jump altitudes varied from four hundred feet to fifteen hundred feet. Some sticks were dropped so near to the coast that the last few men in the sticks landed in the water.

The 2d Battalion drop was centered about four miles to the north of its prescribed zone; only one of its planes landed near drop zone "C". The battalion mission of capturing the two southern beach exits was thus made more difficult by virtue of the additional distance interposed between landing and objective. The 3d Battalion, while dropped in a fairly concentrated pattern, was unfortunate in that the German defenders in the selected drop areas had considered that area to be a likely parachute landing field, and had ringed the area with troops in elaborate defensive positions. A house in the center of the zone had been soaked in oil and was fired when the troops were in mid air. This light, in addition to the light of the battle, was sufficient to permit better marksmanship than in the other zones, and more numerous immediate casualties resulted. This defense further prohibited any kind of assembly, and made the seizure of the two wooden bridges across the Douve seem a remote possibility. (29)(30)

The planes of the Regimental Headquarters, Headquarters and Service Companies were also scattered far from the drop zone "C", but the most unfortunate result of this was that three of the sticks of communications personnel, with their equipment, were dropped miles from the area of proposed operation. (31)

(29) B-3, p.120; (30) B-5, p.6; (31) B-5, p.8.

The 1st Battalion's drop was comparatively concentrated and centered south of St Marie du Mont, about a mile from the prescribed zone. While this area was also defended, the resulting casualties were not nearly as heavy as the 3d Battalion had experienced, but the assembly problem was as great, for the drop was centered between St Marie du Mont, which was occupied in strength by the enemy, and a battery of 105's which had not been reported in any intelligence. Movement from this field was slow and hazardous, and many men took cover in drainage ditches and indentations, and did not leave the field for several hours. (32)

Aside from the poor drop and enemy interference, the major factor retarding the assembly was the terrain. The carefully made map and terrain model studies were rendered worthless by the drop dispersion of troops outside of the division zone, but in addition, the size of the hedgerows and their influence on observation had not been taken into account. (33) The hedgerows were man-high, and averaged about three feet in thickness, and were surmounted by brush and other vegetation. These served to make each field, which was normally small, a compartment which denied observation out of the field, and from the tops of the hedgerows permitted observation into only the adjacent field. Therefore, a man could have been dropped alone into a field and he would have been as effectively isolated from the other troops as if he had been dropped a mile away. It was the loneliness and darkness of the night, coupled with the lack of observation, that primarily slowed down the troops in their assembly. Daylight did little to improve the movement to the assembly areas,

(32) S-2; (33) PK.

for the increased observation was shared equally with the enemy. Assembly lights had been of little assistance by virtue of their limited range; cow bells, whistles, and other sound means were equally poor for the noise of battle tended to drown them out, and the new sound of the high cyclic rate enemy machine guns commanded the greater attention. (34)

Supply problems were aggravated by the poor drop. Simultaneously with the debarkation of the parachutists, the pilots had salvoed the equipment bundles under the planes. Few bundles were retrieved during darkness, as each was marked with a small electric light and the dangers inherent in moving these lights about were all too fully realized by the troops. In the areas wherein the troops were under fire or near heavy firing, primary attention was given to departing those areas with utmost speed.

Consequently, equipment believed to be cumbersome or unnecessary was abandoned with the parachutes and Mae Wests at the drop site. Gas masks were most generally discarded. Some men were forced to leave their musette bags with the precious mortar and machine gun ammunition and the mines. Supply details, working the fields in the succeeding few days, retrieved much of this equipment, although some was picked up by the natives and the enemy. (35) Most of the enemy positions captured held several bundles and an abundance of American equipment, ammunition, rations, weapons, cigarettes, and souvenirs. Thus, until noon of D-day, the troops had few automatic weapons, mortars, radios, or rocket launchers, other than those which had been jumped on the person of the jumper, a practice which had been unpopular in training, but which paid dividends in combat. (36)

(34) PK; (35) S-1; (36) PK.

H -4 HOURS

Colonel Turner, the battalion commander, assembled about thirty of the men who had landed with him on drop zone "C", joined the regimental commander on the field and sent patrols to locate other parties assembling. The jump had taken place at about 0115 hours, 6 June, and it had been anticipated that in two hours the bulk of the battalion would be assembled and would move to its reserve position near Culoville. When the battalion commander arrived at Culoville, his command consisted of two officers and about forty men. By 0400 hours small groups had wandered in and raised the strength of the battalion to nearly fifty. (37)

SEIZURE OF THE EXITS

Colonel Robert F. Sink, commander of the 506th Parachute Infantry, being without communications equipment, was unable to contact his 2d and 3d Battalions or to locate either unit by patrols. Knowing the importance of the seizure of the beach exits, at approximately 0430 hours, he ordered Colonel Turner to take the 1st Battalion to seize beach exit "1" (Overlay I, Map III)(38) One officer was left behind to assemble the rest of the battalion as it came in, and the force moved off down the road to accomplish the mission of the 2d Battalion. Meanwhile, the 2d Battalion was having much better fortune in its assembly and with a strength of about two hundred was enroute to the beach exits (Overlay I, Map III)(39) The division commander not having been in communication with Colonel Sink, had committed his reserve and when the Turner force arrived at the exit, it was already in the hands of the Division, whereupon the force returned to Culoville, meeting light resistance. (40)(41)

(37) PK; (38) B-5, p.13; (39) B-5, p.13; (40) S-3; (41) B-5, p.22.

ACTION AT HOLDY

The route of the Turner force from Culoville to the beach exit passed within five hundred yards of the 105 battery, which was receiving attention from other members of the battalion. The battery was firing its four pieces toward the beach, and its personnel had been engaging the troops in the field with small arms fire. The sound of this fire attracted several of the lost who gravitated to the sound in search of their units. At Holdy (Map IV) the company commanders of Headquarters and "C" Companies joined a force of ten or more men from Headquarters, "A" and "B" Companies, who were attempting to place the battery under fire. This group was immediately increased by two men from the 82d Division, who were far from their landing zones. One of these men had a 1903 rifle with a grenade launcher and some rifle grenades. The other principal armament of the force was a light machine gun with three belts of ammunition. (42)

This group left the buildings at Holdy and moved to a stone farmhouse about twenty yards from the battery position. The machine gun was set up in the road and one belt fired at the position. The hedgerows on both sides of the road restricted the traverse of the gun to less than ten degrees, and it is doubtful that this firing caused any casualties to the enemy. However, the proximity of the fire did cause the gun crews to leave their pieces and take cover in the ditch surrounding the position and the pieces were thereafter not fired by the enemy.

The attacking force realized that it had not yet accomplished anything of real value and would not until the guns themselves were seized. It was decided that a base of fire would be established with the machine gun and the grenade launcher, and the (42) EW.

remainder of the force would cross the road and attempt to enter the ditch in which the gun crews were taking cover. The grenade launcher was set up at the edge of the building atop a hedgerow, but while targets were being pointed out to the gunner, he was shot in the neck; whereupon, he withdrew to Holdy where aid men had established an aid station.

The machine gun and grenade launcher, under the command of one officer, was moved to positions on higher ground across from the farmhouse. The other officer and two men prepared to move along a hedgerow toward the position and then, under cover of the hedgerow surrounding the position, planned to enter the ditch from the northwest. Just as they were moving out, the battalion antitank officer, with one rocket launcher and two men from the antitank platoon, arrived from Holdy. They were oriented quickly and sent around a lateral hedgerow to get into position where they could fire into, or preferably enter, the ditch from the southwest. These two flanking elements moved forward while the machine gun fired short bursts at the top of the hedgerow, concealing the ditch.

Both flanking units crossed the road at about the same time and advanced toward the entrances to the ditch, throwing grenades. The enemy threw grenades back. Although the potato masher grenade could be thrown further, its effect was not comparable to the fragmentation grenade. The ditch was entered from both directions as planned, and the two forces converged toward the center of the position. (43)

The ditch had been improved and made into a deep trench in which ammunition for the guns and grenades and small arms had

(43) EW.

been liberally stocked. The defenders gave little resistance once the trench was entered, because the blast of the rockets from one flank and the continual concussion of grenades from the other took most of the fight out of the artillery men. Some fled down a drainage ditch to the east. About thirty prisoners were taken, and approximately fifty dead or wounded were found in the trenches. (44)(45)(46)(47)

The reduction of the position permitted many soldiers, who had landed near the position, to leave their cover and proceed toward their assembly areas. Some of these men had lain within fifteen yards of the ditch all night, and would have most certainly been killed or captured had the defenders left the cover of their trench and aggressively policed the field instead of attempting to cover the field by fire. (48)

Included in those released from their enforced retirement were the battalion S3, several division staff officers who had landed in the field by glider during the night, about forty 1st Battalion men, and numerous others from other organizations. Total casualties for the attacking force was the one man wounded in the neck. (49)(50)

Found on the position were numerous supply bundles, a quantity of small arms ammunition and grenades, an SCR 300 radio, and the bodies of several parachutists who had landed within the position. Ammunition was redistributed, the troops reorganized, and the decision reached to attack the village of St Marie du Mont through the ditch system to the east and north. A radio operator was located. The frequency was adjusted to the regimental command net on the retrieved radio and the regimental commander

(44) B-5; p.31; (45) B-1, p.23; (46) B-3, p.129; (47) EW; (48) S-3.
(49) EW; (50) S-3.

notified of the situation and the decision to attack the village. He concurred in the decision and urged caution. He further requested that he be kept advised of the situation and progress, as he had radio contact with only one other force, the other 1st Battalion element at Exit "1".(51)(52)(53)

The force, consisting then of the company commanders of Headquarters and "C" companies, the S3, the antitank platoon commander, and about ten men each from Headquarters and "A" and "B" companies, with an armament of one light machine gun and one rocket launcher, entered the ditch to the east of the battery position and proceeded in column of files toward St Marie du Mont.

In the ditch and in the field, many seriously wounded men were found. These were assisted back to the Holdy aid station by members of the force. This so dissipated its strength that when a junction of two major ditches was reached, about two hundred yards from the edge of the town, only about ten men and the officers were left.

The same tactics were agreed upon for the capture of the town. A base of fire unit and an assaulting force was established. At the ditch junction, one company commander proceeded up the ditch with one man and a machine gun, and the other party attempted to cross the open field to the east to close on the south edge of the village. Two men were selected as scouts and directed to proceed across the field by bounds. The first man ran about twenty feet into the field and took cover behind some wisps of hay. A machine gun from the edge of the town opened fire on this man and wounded him. He was retrieved under continuous machine gun fire and the plan to cross this open ground was abandoned. The progress of the other officer with the machine gun was equally fruitless, and the force withdrew to the battery position. Here one of the guns was boresighted on the steeple of the town church and

after knocking that potential observation point out, the suspected machine gun locations on the edge of town were fired upon. Colonel Sink was again contacted by radio and informed of the failure of the attack, and advised that the town could be taken if more troops were available. Reenforced by forty or more men from the regimental CP, another attack on the town was launched. By this time, 1300 hours, elements of the 4th Division were pushing into the town from the east, and the town fell without serious opposition.

During the day, the 2d Battalion had secured the second beach exit, and troops of the seaborne units were passing through the exits and proceeding inland to the north. At dusk the two elements of the 1st Battalion and the 2d Battalion were assembled at Culoville. There had still been no word from or contact made with the 3d Battalion, which was responsible for a regimental objective to the south. Neither had there been any contact with the battalion of the 501st Parachute Infantry, which was responsible for securing the highway bridges over the Douve, north of Carentan. (54)

Tactically, the regiment could be considered the best established of any in the division. The regimental commander had control of two of his battalions and was more or less centrally located within the division area; whereas, the other regiments were engaged in accomplishing their missions on the perimeter. These, and the absence of positive information of the units to the south, were the considerations that caused Major General Maxwell Taylor, the Division Commander, to visit the regimental CP on the night of 6 June, and order the regiment to reconnoiter the area to the south in force. (55)(56) To assist in this, he attached to the regiment the 401st Glider Infantry Battalion, which had come ashore during the day.

(54) B-5, p.35; (55) B-5, p.35; (56) B-3, p.135.

RECONNAISSANCE TO THE SOUTH

As the 401st was at full strength and fresh, Colonel Sink planned to have it lead the attack through Vierville toward St Come du Mont, to be followed by the 1st Battalion, the 2d Battalion, Regimental Headquarters, a platoon of attached AT guns, and a platoon of engineers. The strength of the 1st Battalion was unpretentious; "A" Company numbered around forty, "B" Company had nearly fifty, "C" Company totaled thirty odd, and Headquarters Company approximately fifty. The attack was planned for 0430 hours on 7 June. (57)

The Glider Battalion failed to appear at the appointed time and the 1st Battalion was given the mission of leading the attack. "B" Company was ordered to take responsibility for two hundred yards on the right of the road, "C" Company two hundred yards on the left of the road, and "A" and Headquarters Companies were ordered to follow on the road. The Battalion S4 had been active during the night, and as the Companies passed the IP on time, rations and a limited quantity of ammunition ^{were} ~~was~~ handed out. (58)

"B" Company was harrassed by sniper fire which came from the hedgerows to its front and right; consequently, its progress was slow. "C" Company, moving in a line of platoons in column along adjacent hedgerows, had no contact with the enemy until reaching the highway from the beach to St Come du Mont. Here, at the north of Vierville, "C" Company was engaged by approximately a platoon. The Company deployed on both sides of the road and sent one squad around the extreme left flank to attempt to dislodge the enemy from the hedgerows. This squad did not move far enough to the left and was outflanked and pinned down by fire. (59)(60)

(57) B-6, p. 11; (58) PK; (59) EW; (60) B-3, p.138.

"B" Company had come up to Vierville on the right of the road and was preparing to continue toward the south when General Taylor and Colonel Sink contacted Colonel Turner in the Vierville church. Headquarters and "A" Companies had continued on the road into Vierville without opposition. Colonel Sink had received information that elements of the 3d Battalion had held their objective, so he ordered the 1st Battalion toward a crossroads to the south of St Come du Monte. (61) As "C" Company was still engaged, "A" Company was ordered to take "C" Company's position on the left of the road, and "C" Company was ordered to disengage and take "A" Company's place in the column.

"C" Company requested an antitank gun to assist in disengaging the forward squad. This gun was made available by the regimental commander, and with it the hedgerows in which the enemy was concealed were taken under direct fire, relieving the pressure on the squad so that it withdrew without suffering any casualties. (62) The enemy did, however, pursue the squad along the hedgerows, so that when the squad had rejoined the Company at the edge of the town and the Company had proceeded south on the road toward St Come du Mont, the 2d Battalion, following on the road, was taken under fire while in the town, and pinned down for several hours. (63)

The progress of "B" and "A" Companies, after leaving Vierville, was slow. The enemy occupied the hedgerows, particularly on the right of the road, and forward progress by "B" Company was made by sending out units to outflank the enemy positions. Whereupon, the enemy would withdraw one hedgerow to his rear, and the same process would have to be repeated. The smokeless, flashless properties of the enemy's ammunition, and his skill at camouflaging himself and his positions, made it extremely difficult to locate the precise location from which he was firing.

(61) B-5, p. 37; (62) EW; (63) S-1.

THE HEDGEROWS

The hedgerows deserve more than just passing comment for they had a direct affect on the tactics employed by units of all echelons. The French farmers considered them as part of the economy of the land, as they served in a variety of ways. A hedgerow was at once a permanent fence which required little or no maintenance; a plot of ground which supported the growth of small trees and brush, providing the farmer with his cooking and heating fuel; a cover to birds and small animals for his table; a vineyard from which he harvested berries; a barrier for the control of surface drainage and erosion; and, not the least important, a wind break, protecting his crops from channel storms.

The Germans integrated these barricades into their defenses. Throughout the hedgerows, and particularly the intersections, they dug spider holes, carefully removing the soil and retaining the natural appearance of the position. These provided a series of preconstructed outpost lines or defensive lines, which could be manned by a minimum of troops and permitted the greatest flexibility of movement to the defenders. The trees and brush were ideal for the erection and concealment of telephone wire, as they screened observation from everywhere except the air. The hedgerows were thick enough to give protection from the fire of all weapons except direct hits of artillery. The ditches at the base of each side of the hedgerows were available for protection when the attacker employed his mortars, so that the only effective fire which could be placed on defending troops was direct hits in the ditches or on the spider holes.

The advantages of the hedgerow systems were predominately with the defender through his knowledge of the terrain and the

location of the preconstructed emplacements. A small holding force could delay a relatively large force and cause it to deploy, bring up its mortars, search the suspected hedgerow, and probe extensively to the flanks. The decision to abandon the position remained with the defender until antitank weapons could be brought up, and, by direct short range fire, blast open the spider hole. This method, while effective, was costly in gun crews, and embarrassingly slow, for a squad could delay a battalion for a matter of hours.

While training in England, the division had maneuvered in the Slapton Sands area on the south coast. (Map I-7) This area had been chosen as it most nearly represented the terrain of Normandy. The hedgerows, the clay soil, the Norman type architecture, the deep sunken roads, and the tactics were essentially the same as were later seen in Normandy. Unfortunately, the tactics at Slapton Sands and for the first few days in Normandy were confined to maneuvering along the road nets, and the tremendous tactical benefits which could have been gained through better use of the Slapton Sands area were lost.

ACTION AT BEAUMONT

The distance from Vierville to Beaumont by road is less than 1700 yards, yet it took approximately an hour and a half for the 1st Battalion to reach this small cluster of farm buildings. Here, the line was slowly straightened when "B" Company pulled up along side of "A" Company, which had had relatively open terrain on its flank and had progressed more rapidly. It was here, also, that the first organized defensive position, occupied in strength, was reached.

On the right of the road, in "B" Company's sector, was a farmhouse surrounded by orchards. It was on commanding ground

and the area around it had been built up into a strong defensive position. Connecting trenches ran down the hill to the house, where they branched off in all directions and gave clear fields of fire and excellent routes of withdrawal. "B" Company, in its forward push, had pressed the enemy back to the house but could not stretch its already thin line further to insure that the house and the adjacent trenches were cleared. (64)(65) These positions were reoccupied by the enemy and "B" Company was taken under heavy fire, suffering several casualties. At approximately the same time, accurate mortar fire fell on the crossroad at Beaumont, and continued to fall intermittantly throughout the remainder of the time the battalion operated in that area.

"A" Company, pushing off again on the left, was stopped immediately by machine gun fire from the hedgerows to its direct front. Previously, in the morning's advance, most of the opposition had been rifle fire, but this fire was much heavier in volume and the casualties inflicted in the first skirmish with this position were heavy. About seven men from "B" Company had become casualties since leaving Veirville; "A" Company now lost five, and "C" Company and Headquarters Company together had lost another five from mortar fire on the road. (66)

Shortly before noon, three light tanks from the beach joined the battalion at Beaumont. They were sent up the road toward the head of the column, where Colonel Turner and the Tank Commander decided to attempt to knock out the machine gun positions by tank artillery fire. To point out targets, Colonel Turner, who was a former Cavalry officer, got into the lead tank and it started down the road. It had gone but a few yards when Colonel Turner, who was standing up in the turret, was shot through the

(64) PK; (65) B-5, p.38; (66) S-2.

head and killed instantly. The news of this misfortune spread rapidly through the battalion, and served to split the battalion into four separate companies. (67)(68)(69)(70)

Colonel Turner was a slight, aggressive individual, and had been with the battalion since its activation. He had dominated his staff and company commanders, but his strong character had been a source of inspiration and confidence to the battalion.

His executive officer had only one previous opportunity to demonstrate his capabilities to the battalion, and that had been an unfortunate experience on the occasion of Colonel Turner's only leave. The incident had occurred on the last battalion exercise prior to moving to the marshalling area. It had been a cold, miserable night, and nothing had been accomplished according to plan. The route had been lost and there was much marching without purpose. The troops chose to ignore the difficulties of the terrain, the complete darkness, and other inadvertant misfortunes, and laid full blame for their misery, whether or not it was justified, on the acting battalion commander. (71)

Although Colonel Turner had been a strict disciplinarian, and had been exacting with his officers and men, he was respected by all; so it was the news of his death and the lack of confidence in the new commander that reduced the morale of the battalion to a low point.

Another tank was struck by a German rocket, and all the tanks withdrew to the crossroad where shortly after, on Colonel Sink's order, they moved to Angoville au Plain to assist the 2d Battalion in clearing out that town.

(67) PK; (68) S-2; (69) B-5, p 41; (70) B-3, p.138; (71) PK.

"B" Company continued to press toward the farm buildings on its right flank with little success. A 57 mm AT piece was brought forward and pushed through the hedgerows to bring direct fire on the farmhouse and the trench system, and "B" Company was then able to clear out this area. (72)

While "B" Company was mopping up, "C" Company was committed to the attack with instructions to probe to the left and endeavor to locate and envelop the enemy flank. "C" Company moved laterally along the road toward Angoville au Plain for about four hundred yards, then turned to the right, and, in a column of files with one squad one hedgerow out on each flank for security, made its first probe.

This probe was successful only in determining that the enemy occupied the hedgerows here in as great strength as at Beaumont. Several machine guns brought fire on the company, and it retired to the road and attempted another probe further to the left. This attack was just getting under way when the company was ordered back to Beaumont. (73) "B" Company's success in clearing out the farmyard was to be exploited, and it was planned to move the battalion through "B" Company's sector and continue the drive toward the St Come du Mont crossroad. Before the plan was implemented, the enemy moved in again and occupied the farmyard, and brought fire on the troops at Beaumont. Two of the tanks rejoined the battalion, and once more "B" Company assaulted the farm buildings; this time to meet even stronger resistance; and after receiving more casualties, withdrew to ^{Beaumont?} Belmont. (74)

D COMPANY ATTACHED

Colonel Sink, upon being informed of the situation, decided that more of a force was needed than the 1st Battalion could muster, and "D" Company was attached. "D" Company, consisting of

more than ninety men and probably the largest company in the regiment, was attached to the 1st Battalion(75) at 1630 hours, and was ordered to assist "B" Company by fire from a position about four hundred yards to the north of the farm buildings. With this assistance, the two tanks and the 57, "B" Company pushed the enemy back from the farm again.

"C" Company was then ordered to relieve "B" Company and hold the farm position until the battalion could move out of Beaumont. A heavy concentration of mortar fire was delivered on the cross-road during this relief, and additional casualties were incurred. By this time the troops were utterly fatigued. They had little or no sleep for more than fifty-two hours; they had experienced the emotional strain of a parachute jump; they had been continually active, either marching, fighting, patrolling, or sitting out the nights under most trying circumstances. They were losing confidence in their commander and his ability to get the battalion moving. They were bushed! They had almost "had it." (76)(77)

NIGHT ATTACK

"D" Company was recalled from its position and ordered to move down the road immediately toward St Come du Mont. One tank was to be loaded with the wounded and was ordered to the Angoville au Plain aid station. The other tank was ordered to support "C" Company until the column had cleared the crossroad. Headquarters, "A", "B", and "C" Companies were to follow the relatively fresh "D" Company in that order. (78)(79)(80)(81)

At 2100 hours "D" Company moved out down the road which a few hours before had been so heavily defended. Its progress was

(75) B-6, p.12; (76)(77) PK; (78) S-2; (79) S-3; (80) PK; (81)S-4

so fast that the fatigued men of the battalion had difficulty in keeping pace. (82)

The commander of "D" Company had been given the briefest orientation when he was ordered forward. Consequently, he and his men knew only that there was supposed to be friendly troops somewhere in the vicinity of the crossroad south of St Come du Mont, their objective. As they approached the crossroad east of St Come du Mont they put up orange flares, the signal of (83) friendly troops. The flares brought down a blast of fire from both flanks, and "D" Company was halted, momentarily, in the ditches on both sides of the road. (84)

The word was passed back down the column for the tank to come forward. It left the Beaumont crossroad in response to the message just as the last of "C" Company was falling in on the road. Within a few minutes, another message was passed back, "Machine guns to the head of the column!" All of the machine gun crews ran forward. While they were still running down the road, another message came back calling for the Bazookas to come to the head of the column, and all of the rocket launcher crews double-timed toward the head of the column. It was nearly dark, and visibility was limited to the hedgerow nearest the flanks and to about ten yards to the front and rear. (85)(86)(87)

Upon arrival at the head of the column, the tank fired with good effect to the flanks, and forced the Germans to keep down while the column regained its momentum and pushed ahead. (88) All of "D" Company and most of Headquarters and "A" Companies cleared the crossroad east of St Come du Mont without suffering casualties and continued toward the objective about seven hundred yards to the front. The Germans permitted this much of the column to pass, then, from positions north and east of St Come du Mont, brought heavy fire upon the column. (89)

(82) B-5, p.44; (83) B-5, p.44

(84) S-4; (85) S-3; (86) S-2; (87) PK; (88) S-4; (89) S-2;

SEVERANCE OF THE COLUMN

This was a little too much for the troops just about to start their third day of fighting without rest. The battalion commander, his S3, and the company commanders of Headquarters and "A" Companies were with "D" Company to the front along with all of the machine guns and rocket launchers. Someone along the line passed the word, "Pull back", and the tail of the column recoiled into Beaumont. The battalion adjutant, at the rear, directed the companies into assembly areas around the crossroad as they came in, and an effort was made to determine who had ordered the withdrawal.

This point still remains in doubt. None of the officers would admit having originated the message, and not all of the men could be interviewed in the dark. It was the opinion of the most reliable observers that the enemy was too strong at the front to permit another attempt to rejoin the battalion until automatic weapons could be obtained. (90) Meanwhile, "D" Company, with the tank, had pushed on to the objective and occupied a strong defensive position prepared by the Germans. By midnight the forward elements of the battalion were well disposed to hold until morning. (91) It was with considerable surprise that the battalion commander received, at 0015 hours, a radio message to return to Beaumont. At 0030 hours the return was well under way, and at 0130 hours the battalion had closed in Beaumont. The tank had been knocked out by a German rocket on the objective, and the body of one of the tank crew was blown out of the tank into the ditch at the side of the road where it

(90) PK; (91) S-2.

burned. The crossroad was subsequently referred to as "Dead Man's Corner" to distinguish it from another crossroad, the one to the east of St Come du Mont.

PLAN FOR D PLUS 2

When the rearmost element of the battalion had decided against attempting to join the forward part of the battalion, the senior officer present took a patrol and reported the situation to Colonel Sink in his CP at Angoville au Plain. He arrived a few minutes behind Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, the Assistant Division Commander, who had brought news of new attachments. The belated battalion of the 401st Glider Infantry was attached again to the regiment, along with a battalion of the 501st Parachute Infantry. Nearly two battalions of artillery and additional light tanks had been made available and were also attached. (92)(93)

With such a strong force available for the attack on St Come du Mont and the bridges to the south, Colonel Sink did not believe it prudent to leave the 1st Battalion in its extended position, and he had promptly ordered it back to Beaumont.

The order for the attack in the morning was given verbally, and generally it called for the convergence of all the available battalions upon St Come du Mont and the highway extending south to the bridge over the Douve, which was assigned to the 401st for destruction. The 501st was assigned a sector on the right of the 401st, and the 1st Battalion was given the extreme right sector. The 2d Battalion was to follow the 1st Battalion by bounds. The attack would be supported by tanks and artillery. The line of departure extended roughly northeast and southwest from a point on the road about four hundred yards south of Beaumont. The

(92) B-6, p.13; (93) B-5, p.48.

attack was to jump off at 0445 hours, preceded by an elaborate artillery preparation. The two battalions of artillery were to fire a ten-minute preparation on suspected enemy strong points, including St Come du Mont, to be followed by a rolling barrage scheduled to advance one hundred yards every four minutes.(94)

The time left for preparation of the attack was negligible. It permitted passing the orders to only battalion and company commanders, and left very little time for orienting junior leaders on the situation and the mission. (95)(96) The battalion commander of the 501st Parachute Infantry knew little of the general situation in the area, and could make only a map study of the terrain. Time was of interest to the 1st Battalion as a period for sleep only. So fatigued were the troops that the company commanders had to physically kick the men awake and on their feet at jump off time. (97) The gun crews and ammunition bearers, who had left their units the preceding night, were sorted out into their respective units enroute to the line of departure.

The battalion plan of attack envisaged that "A" Company, followed by "C" Company, would attack toward the east side of St Come du Mont on the battalion's right, while "D" Company, which was still attached, would attack on the left of "A" Company, followed by "B" and Headquarters Companies. (98)

THE ATTACK

The attack was launched on time, although there was still considerable confusion caused by men moving to their proper units. The artillery preparation was fired as planned and the troops followed it as close as one hundred yards. No enemy resistance was encountered and the attack progressed to the road leading east out of St Come du Mont.

(94) B-6; p.14; (95) B-3, p.140; (96) PK; (97) EW; (98) S-2.

Along this road the battalion halted and built up a line, and soon was brought under heavy mortar fire. Mortars could be heard firing from the southwest part of the town; either the fire was observed, or it had been previously registered for it was incredibly accurate. The zone of fire extended from the east edge of town, along the road, and past the crossroad, the crossroad receiving particularly heavy concentrations. (99)(100)

From this point, the situation becomes obscure. Other historians have attempted to record the succeeding events with doubtful success. Colonel S.L.A. Marshall, the historian of the European Theater, spent several days in June and July 1944 interviewing the available participants in the action. His record, which appears in a small unit study entitled, "506th Parachute Infantry in Normandy Drop", is brief and somewhat misleading. His story alleges to relate the actions of battalions, whereas in point of fact, the battalions had become so dispersed and intermingled that their identity was lost, and the history relates more accurately the movements of the battalion commanders and small elements of the battalions.

*His
should have
been a
footnote.*

At the crossroad, the commanders of the 1st Battalion, 506th and the 1st Battalion of the 501st met. This was their first contact, the attack order having been given to each individually, and their first opportunity to discuss boundaries, mutual support, and rate of progress. Both commanders were of the opinion that the crossroad south of St Come du Mont was the specific objective of their own battalion. Additionally, the 501st was being pinched out, as the 1st Battalion's left flank lay on the road and the inundated area on the right was forcing the 401st into the left of the 501st. (101)(102)

(99) S-3; (100) EW; (101) S-2; (102) B-1, p.78

Colonel Sink was contacted by radio and the situation explained to him. He directed the 1st Battalion of the 506th to seize St Come du Mont, and the 501st, 1st Battalion, to seize the crossroad. (103)

In the half hour that this conference had consumed, most of the troops had taken what cover they could and had fallen asleep. Others, uncomfortable under the heavy mortar fire, had moved forward to avoid it. Troop leaders had become casualties and virtually all control was lost. Thus, when the order to attack the town was given, there were few troops available to execute the mission.

The battalion adjutant and the S3 rounded up the few Headquarters Company men that could be found, and this force of about ten men attacked the town along the road west, under the direction of the adjutant. The S3 endeavored to find more of the battalion and finally located part of a platoon of "D" Company. This unit attacked from the north on the east side of the main highway. Both of these attacks were stopped by the enemy at the edge of the town. (104)(105)

About twenty men from "A" and "C" Companies had gone forward while the battalion commanders were determining who was to seize the crossroad. They moved to a position on top a cut along the highway from which they could cover the crossroad by fire, and stretched out to sleep. (106) The remainder of the battalion, according to reports of officers that night, was either asleep or drowsily waiting for the attack to advance. A part of "D" Company had gone on down to the objective prior to the time that the rest of the battalion had halted. This element, finding itself over extended, returned to the crossroad about 1000 hours and occupied German prepared positions. (107)

(103) S-2; (104) S-4; (105) S-2; (106) EW; (107) B-3, p.156.

The two units attacking the town spent most of the day exchanging a few shots with enemy soldiers in the town, but made no aggressive effort to continue the attack until 1600 hours, when a patrol returned and reported the town to be empty. (108)

The situation was little better in the 501st Battalion. Part of it had eventually gone forward past the objective, and had then returned to it when 88 mm fire from the south made their more exposed forward position untenable. (109)

There are at least two views of the enemy action that day: The one taken by Lt Colonel Charles H Chase, the Regimental Executive Officer, that the enemy resistance encountered in and around St Come du Mont was "a high-powered delaying action"; and the view taken by this writer, although neither can be proven.

The first element of the battalion to engage in a fire fight was the mixed group from "A" and "C" Companies shortly after 0800 hours, when it had taken position along the highway cut. This action was with what appeared to be a patrol moving south out of the town. In the ensuing fire fight, each side incurred one casualty. The patrol withdrew and no further enemy activity was noted in the south of town. (110) The second encounter was about 0900 hours, when the adjutant's group attacked the east side of the town and was held off. (111) The third encounter was shortly after 0900 hours, when the "D" Company force attacked and was pushed back. (112)

The fourth contact was at about 1000 hours when the "A" and "C" Company group, and the elements of the 501st near the cross-road, were attacked by a small force from the west. This attack

(108) S-2; (109) B-3, p.158; (110) EW; (111) S-2; (112) S-4.

was driven off, and another, in greater strength, was launched immediately. The apparent objective of the attack was the high ground overlooking the cut. This attack was also stopped, but with a loss of about half of the "A" and "C" Company men. They were on exposed ground and had no entrenching tools to make any kind of cover. Further, the ground to the rear was so exposed that retreat was impossible, and the safest tactics appeared to be the continuous employment of every weapon available.

These attacks continued until nearly noon, when the enemy executed a flanking maneuver around the right flank and seized the hill, driving the eight or ten remaining men back to the road on the east. At precisely this moment, reinforcements in the form of three light tanks arrived from the direction of Beaumont and were immediately committed frontally toward the cut. About twenty men from the 501st and the "A" and "C" Company forces, taking cover in rear of the tanks, advanced and recaptured their previous position. (114) The presence of the tanks put an entirely different light on the situation, apparently, for the enemy promptly withdrew to the west. (115)

Seizure of the crossroad, and the clearing of enemy from the beachhead area, completed the initial mission of the 101st Airborne Division. At about 1800 hours, the battalion was assembled east of St Come du Mont and reverted to regimental reserve. The following day, an abandoned supply train was found with its head at the objective crossroad, and extending back along the road to the west. This train was horsedrawn, and consisted of about fifty wagons with various supplies, a few artillery pieces and kitchen wagons with utensils, containing a meal, still warm. (117)(118) Whether or not this train (113) EW;
(114) EW; (115) B-1, p.78; (117) B-6, p.14; (118) EW.

belonged to a unit emplaced to execute a delaying action, or to a unit which was attempting to fight its way southward through St Come du Mont to Carentan, was never determined. The question is of importance now only in considering the doctrine of defense against airborne troops. The Normandy campaign clearly indicated that the German defense against airborne attack was not tactically sound.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

From the viewpoint of historians interested mainly in the "big picture", the employment of Airborne troops in Operation Overlord clearly illustrates the tactical advantage of using airborne and seaborne troops together in establishing a beachhead. The close proximity of Utah and Omaha Beaches, the similarity of terrain, defending troops, time and plan of the seaborne assault, and the marked contrast in casualties, and D-day ground taken by the seaborne units on the two beaches, most certainly will be used as a yardstick by future strategists and historians. Even if they should add to the seaborne casualties on Utah Beach, the casualties of the Airborne force, it will still indicate the desirability of combining the two methods of attack.

The selection of the landing zones close to the beach also will receive favorable consideration, for they tended to isolate the beachhead from reserves, to permit the destruction of the actual beach defenders, and enabled the airborne force to be resupplied and reinforced promptly. The additional depth so speedily added to the beachhead also permitted a more orderly debarkation of seaborne troops.

One of the imponderables of the operation is the comparative efficiency of the airborne force as it operated from where it actually was landed, as opposed to what it might have accomplished

had the air corps put the troops on the planned landing zones. There was considerable bitterness among the airborne immediately following the operation, and maps showing actual landing patterns of each serial were compiled and forwarded to higher headquarters with letters of complaint. From the standpoint of the airborne unit commanders, this attitude is understandable, for they experienced great difficulty in securing tactical unity and could secure their objectives only with scratch forces.

However, the objectives were secured, often by mixed groups of less than one-fifth the force which was assigned the objective. It is the operations of these small groups which warrants the most study, for it can be concluded that the determination and thorough orientation of the individuals in these groups in the absence of normal tactical leadership was the deciding factor in the success of the overall operation.

Certainly, due credit must be given to the tactical commanders for providing a good plan of operations, and for their insistence on the most elaborate briefing of all concerned. They had the foresight to realize that upon loading into the airplanes in England, tactical control was temporarily relinquished - for how long, they could not determine. They can, of course, be criticized for their failure to foresee the effect of the hedgerows on the assembly after jump.

Secrecy in the assembly after jumping is of course as highly desirable as in any other operation, whether it be movement to an assembly area prior to an attack, or the occupation of a defensive position; but the desirability of a speedy assembly and resultant immediate movement to contact as opposed to delayed assembly and the consequent piecemeal attack on the various

objectives, as was the result in this operation, must be carefully weighed to determine the desired degree of secrecy to be imposed on the assembly.

Full responsibility had been placed on the Air Corps for the delivery to pinpoint landing zones, where it was anticipated that the density of troops would be such that normal assembly procedures would suffice, and where each battalion commander was responsible for the assembly of his troops by whatever method he chose. This delegation of responsibility for the assembly and failure to provide emergency assembly procedures is questionable in the face of the previous repeated Air Corps failures to deliver to the selected drop zones in Africa, Sicily, and on numerous occasions in training. This practice was advantageous in one respect in that it left the Air Corps as a whipping post should assembly be too long delayed, but it made small provision for the execution of the ground mission. Conformity to the military precept of command responsibility in this instance left much to be desired, for the Air Corps commanders in turn could fall back on the weather and flak, both beyond their control, as the reasons for their failure.

On the other hand, study of the drop landing pattern reveals that the drop was not so bad that a much more successful assembly could have been made, had adequate provision been made for a bad landing. Each battalion serial was dropped very generally near its zone and the distance between sticks was not so great as to entirely rule out line of sight assembly aids.

The 2d Battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry had the most successful after-jump assembly of any in the regiment. Its

principal assembly aid was a cluster of colored lights which the Battalion S3 hung as high as possible in a tree atop the hedgerows, and consequently had assembled about two hundred men at dawn.

The 1st Battalion assembly system was based on the premise that the Battalion would be landed in the same density as that of the planes in flight. Consequently, upon landing, the last man out of the plane would orient himself on the direction flown by the planes and would then move in the opposite direction, collecting members of his stick as he moved back toward the first man out. Successive waves of nine planes in the serial would superimpose their sticks on the first wave on the ground, so that a general movement to assembly would be under way prior to the time the last men were on the ground.

An additional aid, a red signal lamp, was carried by each company commander, to be flashed in a prearranged code toward the oncoming men out of the plane after him. In training, this system had worked well, and the battalion could assemble after a good drop near the pathfinder T on the drop zone within twenty minutes after the last man was out of his ship. This was on terrain without hedgerows. The hedgerows tended to isolate men in the various small fields, and neither the signal lamp, nor the intended gravitation toward the end of the drop zone, was effective.

Another device had been utilized with great success in training, but was discarded for the operation on the grounds that it violated secrecy, and would be unnecessary, as it was presumed that the Air Corps would deliver to the drop zone, which had been so thoroughly studied from air photos and terrain models. This device was the 60 mm mortar parachute flare, which was visible for more than a mile. Obviously, in discarding this aid, proper consideration was not given to the terrain or the possibility of a poor drop.

Just as seaborne assault troops have criticized the navy for failure to deliver to assigned beaches, airborne troops have criticized the air corps for failure to deliver to assigned drop zones. It is felt that this general tendency for ground force commanders to rely on command responsibility of another arm to deliver their troops to a designated point to initiate combat, is questionable. More properly, they should expect the worst, and have alternate plans.

It is worthwhile to keep in mind the doctrine of defense against airborne attack as presently taught at The Infantry School in analyzing the German defense in this operation. It is difficult to criticize the German defenders in their defense against airborne attack, as so little is known of their actual plan. The artillery battery near Holdy, by staying within its position, and not attacking from the position to kill or capture the landing parachutists in the immediate area, was itself destroyed. The doctrine of defense against airborne attack as presently taught offers little improvement over the tactics employed by this artillery battery.

An anti-airborne defense doctrine which would be more valid must be based on the premise "Kill or be killed". Airborne troops are initially in no position either to take great numbers of prisoners or to defend themselves. Humanitarianism and international law may demand that quarter must be offered, but the defender who expects quarter from airborne troops, or offers it to them, on their initial landing, is a fool.

It is not meant to imply that quarter was refused in this operation, for wherever it was offered it was accepted. It is

the intent to indicate that the defenders of the artillery battery near Holdy lost their position and suffered great casualties not commensurate with the casualties they could have inflicted on the parachutists in the field, had they been imbued with a doctrine to destroy the attackers as they lay as individuals relatively helpless in their equipment. As soon as these individuals achieved mobility, and joined other forces, even one or two other individuals, they became an attacking force.

Such a small unimposing group is not a formidable opponent, but the assembly of such groups into any kind of a striking force must be prevented at all costs. These groups initially have no rear area; no administrative personnel to take care of prisoners; no definite knowledge of the location of other groups or medical installations; no information of the overall success of the operation elsewhere; and they most definitely are imbued in training, and by the circumstances of their situation, with the will to close with and destroy the enemy, for each enemy destroyed increases their own chance of survival. These factors must be considered in establishing a doctrine of defense.

It is believed that our airborne strategists and tacticians are too much bemused by their opinions of the invincibility of an airborne attack, and have not given sufficient serious thought to determining a defense against airborne plan which will be workable.

Colonel S.L.A. Marshall, in his small unit study, "508th Parachute Infantry in Normandy Drop", observes: "With all their advantages, these Germans could not get their heads up. They fired from whatever cover they happened to be holding, and not one man among them moved out to engage the invaders in personal encounter. All over the Cotentin Peninsula, wherever the airborne landed, this

held true. The enemy seemed gripped by mortal terror. His men would fire, but they would not move out."

The present doctrine, like the German tactics in this operation, does not prescribe that every unit down to platoon must have a definite area of responsibility to defend by fire and by shock action. Rather, it prescribes that a unit will contain the enemy until a mobile reserve can counterattack. And what happens when the mobile reserve itself is involved in defending against an airborne attack on its own position? Should the outlying unit continue to attempt to contain by fire alone, and be destroyed by small units escaping from their zone of fire and rallying to attack their position? What happens to the mobile reserve when sufficient small groups have assembled and surrounded their position? Can they hope to hold off until D plus 2 or 3, when the airborne has consolidated and can establish POW cages?

The doctrine of defense, at all costs, and the more commonly practiced and more easily taught virtue of living to fight again another day, must be correctly blended to provide a sound defense.

Second guessing - in this operation, the Germans could have put up a much better defense if they had done three things: first, required each position and installation to devise a plan for containing airborne troops landing in its zone of responsibility by fire with part of its force, and immediately attacking and destroying the airborne troops in the area contained; second, indicating rallying points for the troops in the positions and installations in the areas not affected by the landing operations. This would have been in keeping with the principle of mass of our own troops for a vigorous counterattack or a strong defense on

ground of your own choosing. It would further the principles of economy ~~and~~ of force and security by removing small vulnerable units from dangerous areas wherein they could be expected to be overrun and destroyed. It would tend to build up a force capable of taking the offensive. It would permit the principle of movement to be utilized, as opposed to remaining on position, being surrounded, and taken.

Third, it is apparent that the Germans failed to have a mobile reserve down to company level. Present doctrine teaches that a mobile reserve will be maintained at battalion and regimental level. In rear areas, and in this case any area not overlooking the beaches is considered a rear area, experience teaches that in combat, comfort of the troops is a prime consideration, and usually results in troop occupation of buildings when not actually on position; and the location of suitable buildings is frequently more of a deciding factor in troop disposition than maintaining tactical unit. Therefore, it is more common to find a company with tactical unity than it is to find a battalion. Even the company must provide certain security elements in its own area, and these security elements are included in those positions and installations such as are mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The remainder of the company not on security details should be considered a mobile reserve, and should be authorized, if not previously directed, to make immediate attack across any landing zone in its area. Speed is far more important in this consideration than is the accumulation of a large counterattacking force, to seek out and destroy an elusive and ever increasing airborne force.

The essence of the doctrine of anti-airborne defense must be the denial of the principle of mass to the airborne at all costs, and through the mass of own troops, by the use of rallying points,

the attainment of movement, economy of force, cooperation, security, and most important, the offensive.

The analysis of the supply functions and operations of the Normandy campaign deserves separate treatment, for the problems of supply were extremely difficult and complex until the beach area was built up and capable of giving logistical support. Emphasis in training the battalion had been entirely on tactics, and little attention had been given to training the company commanders in supply of ammunition in combat. On D-day the problem was acute. The widespread drop had scattered supply bundles over a considerable area, and the only ammunition resupply available was that taken from the dead and wounded, or from what bundles had landed in the immediate area of the various localized operations.

The decision to have a reserve of mortar and machine gun ammunition carried on individuals not members of the crews of those weapons was excellent. It is unfortunate that in training the same technique had not been practiced, so that the troops would be accustomed to carrying ammunition for other than their basic weapon, and would have realized the importance of maintaining that reserve. As it worked in practice, the men were primarily concerned with their individual weapons and responsibilities and tended to abandon this extra ammunition when it became burdensome. Previous experience would have been helpful also in establishing procedures and techniques for collecting this ammunition and having it available as needed. The limited transportation, even when supplemented by indigenous wagons and captured vehicles was insufficient to collect the far flung bundles, many of which were covered by enemy fire.

Leaving the "Big Picture", analyzing the tactical operations of the battalion itself, the D-day activities of the battalion can be ignored, for it did not function as a battalion, being so greatly dispersed, although the actions of two elements of the battalion have been discussed. The most important lessons to be learned from the D-day activities pertain exclusively to small unit fighting.

The typical action described in the reduction of the artillery battery at Holdy indicates the need for superior physical condition in all ranks. It also indicates that commanders and officers of any force and any grade must be capable of sufficient flexibility of thought to command squads, platoons, companies, and in extreme circumstances must be able to temporarily take command of a battalion.

The march from Culoville to Vierville was tactically correct and the snap judgment of the company commanders in adopting the formation of company line with platoons in column turned out to be the most expedient formation for progress in the hedgerow country.

The action at Beaumont warrants careful analysis. Colonel Turner's decision to use tank artillery fire in blasting a way through the hedgerows to the front was commendable with one exception. He should not have gone himself. His death changed a confident aggressive battalion into an indecisive and hesitant one. He had personal knowledge of the attitude of his company commanders toward his executive, and from his reluctance to vest responsibility in this officer, it is probable that he too lacked confidence in him. The Colonel's death had one beneficial result, for the company officers ceased exposing themselves in their previous reckless manner

The repeated capture and abandonment of the farm buildings by "B" Company was a definite tactical error. If the road net had not been as extensive as it was, the determination to continue attacking through this position could be justified. None of the other roads were attempted.

In this same connection, it is difficult to imagine what the new battalion commander had in mind when he initially recalled "B" Company, for he knew then the situation to "A" Company's front. His indecisiveness in ordering either "A" or "C" Companies to exploit "B" Company's success, resulted in the loss of an opportunity to at least attempt the use of another road. "D" Company upon being attached was relatively fresh and was nearly equal in strength to the battalion. It probably could have taken over the farmhouse mission by itself, but instead was used as a base of fire.

The movement from Beaumont to the crossroads south of St Come du Mont at 2100 was initiated after sundown, and the prospect of arriving at Dead Man's Corner prior to dark was doubtful. However, it is considered that this decision, tactically, was correct, for the Division mission, in part, was the blocking of enemy reserves from the south, and the speedy execution of this mission was of vital importance.

The weaknesses of transmitting messages by word of mouth down a column have repeatedly been demonstrated. The orders for the movement of the tanks, machine guns, and bazookas to the head of the column, without specifying which were a violation of the principle of economy of force and poor message originating technique. The resultant stripping of the weapons of the rear element

left it vulnerable.

The message to pull back was not authoritatively issued, yet it was accepted and acted upon by officers and men alike without challenge. There is a slight possibility to excuse this neglect in that the previous messages delivered in like fashion had received equally prompt action.

The men of "D" Company, and the element of the Battalion arriving at the crossroad that night, have frequently criticized the order to give up the ground that they had captured, and return to Beaumont. They seem to have felt that they were on the objective in well prepared positions; that they had radio contact with regiment to direct artillery fire had it been made available to them; and that there was no logical reason for their abandoning the ground that they had captured.

The latest information which the regimental commander and the assistant division commander could consider, in arriving at the decision to recall the battalion, was that there was apparently a strongly defended position extending from the inundated area east of Angoville au Plain due west to the main highway, through which the battalion had penetrated. The additional tanks and artillery support made available to the division was to be integrated into a coordinated attack to overrun this position.

It would appear that there was little gained in withdrawing the battalion, for it was probably as safe on the position as it was penetrating this same strongly defended line again. However, once it was withdrawn, the decision to utilize the same battalion the following morning in the attack is questionable.

The 2d Battalion, less "D" Company, had been in reserve since the preceding morning and would have been a much more effective striking force in the attack. It was given a supporting role in the morning attack, probably because its commander had given such a convincing story of the hardships encountered by his battalion in moving through Vierville following the 1st Battalion. It seems that when "C" Company disengaged, the enemy pursued the company into Vierville, apparently more in hopes of escaping inland than bent on a vigorous attack. The fire which these troops put on the 2d Battalion moving through Vierville stopped it cold. Lt Colonel Charles H Chase, the regimental executive officer, came upon the battalion and found little effort being made to drive back the enemy, whereupon, as he states, he moved around and found a few people which he sent out to the flanks to do something about this matter and shortly thereafter the enemy fire ceased, and the enemy commenced to surrender. Over a hundred prisoners were taken by the 2d Battalion, which was a convincing argument to present as to the fatigue of that battalion.

In rebuttal of this, the 1st Battalion had few prisoners to show. Its action in moving through Beaumont was not impressive as it was time consuming and little ground was gained; so it could be concluded that it had not attacked with much vigor. Perhaps the reason for giving it an attack mission was that the extreme fatigue of the battalion was not realized, and it was being offered an opportunity to distinguish itself.

It was a most ineffective striking force in the morning attack. As has been related, it had not had time to reorganize since its recall from Dead Man's Corner. The men and officers were so fatigued that they were incoherent and unintelligible, and moved like automatons. The battalion as such did nothing noteworthy in the attack on St Come du Mont and Dead Man's Corner,

although a few individuals accidentally became involved in the fighting for possession of the high ground above the highway cut. The 2d Battalion probably could have seized the town and assisted in the holding of the crossroad with much greater dispatch, therefore the decision to commit an exhausted battalion in preference to a fresh battalion is considered to be unjustifiable.

The issuance of the attack order so late at night is apparently customary and necessary. In this instance, it precluded the possibility of any kind of reconnaissance, and did not permit the battalion to properly reorganize. The confusion in determining who was responsible for the seizure of Dead Man's Corner indicates the possibility that the attack order lacked clarity. Perhaps the order was clearly given but not understood. The absence of a written record of the order precludes the clarification of this point, and indicates the desirability of issuing written orders down to battalion level, and in time to permit coordination between adjacent commanders, clarification of questionable points, and issuance of detailed orders to the lowest echelon.

In retrospect, one factor important to troop morale was neglected during this period. That is information of the general situation. The first knowledge concerning the success or failure of the seaborne troops was received the day following the fall of St Come du Mont from a French woman who had a radio report that the British had gotten ashore on their beaches, and that American forces were landing on what had been designated Omaha and Utah beach.

Information of this nature would have been of unestimable morale value to the tired troops the preceding day. Aside from

the few tanks they had seen, they felt that they were fighting the war by themselves. Over half of their comrades were absent either as jump or battle casualties, or had failed to assemble after the drop. An encouraging word of friendly progress when K rations were being passed out, would have done much to erase the prevalent feeling of loneliness.

A graphic summary of the operation of the 1st Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry, from 6-8 June 1944, is appended.

LESSONS

1. The best defense against airborne assault is a vigorous attack ^{against} of the airborne personnel on their drop zone prior to the time they can unlimber their equipment and assemble.

2. The advantages of knowledge of the terrain are lost to the defender who fails to employ vigorous counterattacks in his area of penetration.

3. The employment of airborne troops in rear of a beach-head adds immediate depth, and provides ^{tactical} security for a landing operation.

4. In combined operations, as in ground operations, the commander must provide for the worst in sound alternate plans.

5. Airborne operations emphasize the need for tactical proficiency in all ranks, for every officer is a potential squad leader or battalion commander, whether or not his specialty is in supply, administration, or command.

6. Good quality airphotos and terrain models, and liberal time for their study, are the best substitutes for a reconnaissance.

7. A complete and thorough pre-operational orientation is essential to the success of an airborne mission.

8. Training must be as rigorous and realistic as combat.

9. Speed and not secrecy may frequently be the criteria for assembly after a night jump.

10. The proper doctrine for defense against airborne attack is kill immediately or be destroyed piecemeal.

11. Every unit must have a plan for containing and destroying airborne personnel landing in its vicinity, and for moving elsewhere to reinforce another unit.

12. The individual parachutist must be in superior physical condition to sustain the rigors of prolonged unsupported combat, carrying a great supply load.

13. Every commander owes it to his unit to select and train a competent replacement for himself, and that replacement must be given an opportunity to demonstrate his proficiency to the unit.

14. The tank-infantry team is the best weapon for attack in hedgerow country.

15. Careful study must be given to the terrain in planning every operation.

16. Resupply problems are a phase of training which must be emphasized realistically by practical field problems, in addition to classroom study.

17. The lives of troops and the success of the operation must not be endangered by the employment of exhausted units when fresh units are available.

18. An informed soldier is a better combat soldier.

19. The poor tactics in needlessly relinquishing ground once captured is harmful to morale.

20. To be effective orders must be clear and timely

21. In assigning airborne missions, objectives within the capabilities of a company or a battalion must be assigned to battalions or regiments respectively to insure the availability of sufficient force to accomplish the mission; this practice was unwittingly put into effect in the Normandy Campaign when the enemy defense was overestimated.